

“A sermon which expounds the manner of [averting rebirth in hells].”

An ‘Apocryphal’ Sutta from Thailand*

This article was originally published in **Indo-Iranian Journal** .© 1992 Kluwer Academic Publishers. (in Honour of Professor K.R. Norman), Vol. XXXV, pp. 193-223, 1992.

Introduction

With the recent publication of the *Paññāsa-Jātaka*,¹ the term “apocryphal” may have become acceptable when applied to extra-canonical Buddhist narratives claiming the canonical status of *The Jātaka*.² This term, however, has never before been used for any piece of Pali literature that can be classified as a “sutta”.³ It is, therefore, an extraordinary find when a Pali manuscript is discovered which purports to contain a hitherto unknown “sermon” of the Buddha and which, moreover, claims to be a part of the *Samyutta -Nikāya*. I allude here to a text entitled *Ākāravattārasutta*, found among the Pali manuscripts preserved at the Siam Society, Bangkok. A catalogue of this collection, prepared by Dr. Oskar v. Hinüber, was published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1987.⁴ The author is grateful to the authorities of the Siam Society for a microfilm which gave him an opportunity to publish this unique manuscript in honour of Professor K.R. Norman.

The catalogue describes this manuscript as “[No.] 47. *Ākārava[ttāra]sutta (Vaṇṇanā)* Khmer script; 5 lines 5, 2r 29,0 cm; gilt edged. Folios: *ka-kaḥ, kha, khā*.” The manuscript contains no information on the date or the place of its copying, but the colophon (front cover) gives the name of its donors as [Mr.] Kon Jambhu and [Mrs.] Kees and states that this sutta exist’) in the *Samyutta-Nikāya*: “*khā. nāy k’on ” jam ‘bhu nān keev mī saddhā “srān vai nai bra buddha sāss “hnā. Bra ākāravatta sūtra. mī nai Samyuttanikāy* “. ⁵ After consulting all available bibliographical sources, Dr. v. Hinüber has rightly concluded that “this sutta cannot be traced in *Samyutta-Nikāya* or elsewhere in the Tipiṭaka. “⁶

The title *Ākāravattāra* (with or without the word sutta) occurs thirteen times in the body of the text (see #7, #8, #11, #29, #35, #36 twice, #38 five times, #44) and once (see #32) in its shortened form, *Ākāra-sutta*. Strange as it may seem, there is also another title, viz., *Ākārava[ttāra]sutta (Vaṇṇanā)*, which appears only once, almost at the end of the manuscript (see #48). This suggests the possibility of there being two works here, the “Sutta” and its “Vaṇṇanā” (commentary). The end of the “Sutta” portion is probably indicated by the words “*sambuddhena pakāsitaṃ... sattarasavaggehi paṭimaṇḍititaṃ*” (see #35).

These concluding words are followed by two rather corrupt verses [Nos. 18-19] of obscure meaning. The first verse says: ‘This sutta has been revealed by me (*mayā pakāsitā*) and it should be copied (*likhitabbā*) by a person with faith (*saddhādhara*).’ Is it possible that the agent of this sentence is not the Buddha but the composer of the sutta? The second verse seems to allow such

a meaning: “By me are tied together (*mayā gaṇṭhitā*) in this sutta the virtues of the Buddha like clusters of the best flowers.”

This accords well with the earlier admission that “the *Ākāravattārasutta* was revealed by the Omniscient One after putting together (*sammasitvā*) the Suttanta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma” (see verse no. 16). A work “derived” from the three Piṭakas can hardly be called a “sutta”, but it might be designated a “vaṇṇanā” (commentary). Even this is high honour indeed for this composition, an honour once accorded to the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa.” Briefly summing up the three Piṭakas together with the commentary, he wrote the work called *Visuddhimagga*.” (*The Cūlavamsa*, I, ch. 37, verse 236).⁷

The remainder of the manuscript (#36 – #46) consists of a motley collection of some 37 verses. The sole function of these repetitious verses is to describe an assortment of fruits that result from the recitation of the *Ākāravattārasutta*. This portion can therefore be termed “Vaṇṇanā”, forming a sort of appendix to the “sutta”, if indeed such a division was intended by the author. The familiar closing formula of a sutta, e.g. “*idaṃ avoca bhagavā...bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinandī ti*,” which should have appeared at the end of the “sutta” proper (i.e. at #35), is belatedly introduced at the end of this “Vaṇṇanā”. In the absence of another manuscript of this work, it is not possible to determine if the stray appearance of the name *Ākāravattāra-suttavaṇṇanā* here is the result of a scribal error or if it truly forms the title of a commentary on the *Ākāravattārasutta*. The conclusion of the vaṇṇanā (niṭṭhitā, see #48) is followed by what is probably the most intriguing sentence in the entire work: [#49] “Without a doubt, this sutta has been spoken by the Blessed One, in the *Samyutta-Nikāya*.” Startling as this is, one would expect this reference – the significance of which will be examined below – to occur within the vaṇṇanā and not outside it. It is not unlikely that this reference to the *Samyutta-Nikāya* was appended at a later time by the copyist, the writer of the final words of dedication: [see #50] *iminā puññalikhiteṇa ...nibbānapaccayo hotu*.” But it is also possible that the expression “*iminā puññalikhiteṇa*” might point not to a copyist but to the writer himself, the author of the entire work who, having designated his own composition as a “sutta”, must perforce remain nameless. Judging by the language as well as the subject matter of the text (i.e. the consequences of committing pārājika acts and so forth) and the audacity with which this work was put in the mouth of the Buddha, one must conclude that the author was a learned monk of the Theravāda sect of Thailand where the manuscript was found. The work might well have been composed at the request of the donors mentioned above.

One would expect the vaṇṇanā to explain the meaning of the rather strange title like *Ākāravattārasutta*. The word *Ākāra* is well known in the sense of manner, condition, state, and so forth, while *vattāra* can mean “a speaker” (cf. *evaṃ vattāro honti*, *Jātaka*, I, p. 134), but the compound *Ākāravattāra* is not attested elsewhere. The two words together can yield the meaning “The sutta which expounds the manner [of],” without however specifying the object of the sermon. A brief look at the contents of the text will show that the meaning of the title is completed if we read it as “A sermon which expounds the manner of [averting rebirth in hells].”

The sutta opens with the appropriate words: [#1] “Thus have I heard ... when the Blessed One was residing in Sāvathī at Vultures’ Peak.” It then introduces the Venerable Sāriputta entertaining the following thought: “These foolish beings may commit all sorts of evil deeds ...the house-holders (*gahatthā*) performing such acts as matricide and so forth, might commit a Pārājika offence against the Teaching [#2] and even those who are mendicants (*pabbajitā*) , having cut their roots [of good] might commit *pārājika* offences. They, having committed evil deeds, would be reborn in the *Avīci* hell. Is there any “dhamma,” profound and subtle, capable of preventing their suffering?”

Thinking thus he addressed the Buddha: [#3] “A person guilty of a Pārājika offence ...suffers for ...aeons in the *Avīci* hell; ... of a saṅghādisesa ... in the Mahātāpa hell; ... of a thullaccaya ...in the Tāpana hell; ...of a pācittiya...in the Lokantara hell; ...of a pāṭidesaniya ...in the Bherava hell; ...of a dukkaṭa ... in the Kālasutta hell; of a dubbhāsita ...in the Saṅjīva hell. [#4] Just as; there is cool [water] for extinguishing a hot fire, ... there must be a “dhamma” which could pacify [the effects of] the pārājika and so forth ... [#5]

May the Blessed One preach that “dhamma” which is free from (i.e. saves one from) the evil states of rebirth (*apāya*).”

The Blessed One then spoke: [#6] “O Sāriputta, unabandoned (*avijahitaṃ*) by as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges ... there is the *Ākāravattārasutta*, capable of preventing beings from suffering [#7] in the eight great and sixteen minor hells ... [#8]

Whosoever listens to this sutta and learns it, worships it and remembers it,... such a person, [#10] even if he has committed evil deeds (*dussanakkammaṃ*) against his parents, will not be reborn in evil states for ninety thousand aeons ”

“And which is this *Ākāravattārasutta* of the Tathāgata?” In answer to his own question the Blessed One then uttered the famous formula in praise of the Buddha, known by its beginning words [#11] “*iti pi so bhagavā arahā sammāsambuddho*” and ending with the words “*parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ pakāseti*”.

It is at this juncture that the author of the *Ākāravattārasutta* expands the canonical formula through seventeen sections of varying length called the vaggas. They all begin with the first four words of the original formula: “*iti pi so bhagavā*.” The word immediately following these four words, which is different for each section, is used as a marker for a new vagga. Thus, for example, the word *arahāṃ* (see #12) appears at the beginning of the first vagga. It is followed by a string of nine adjectives (e.g. *sugato,lokavidū*) each again preceded by the words “*iti pi so bhagavā*” The end of the section is marked by “*ti*” and it is then named as “*arahādiguṇavagga*.” This naming pattern continues through the remaining sixteen vaggas. It is possible to surmise that the author was naming the vaggas in imitation of a canonical text like the *Dhammapada*, in which each vagga derives its name from a word occurring in its first verse (e.g. *Appamādivagga*, *Cittavagga*). The total number of vaggas, seventeen, is probably without any significance.

This first, the *Arahāvagga*, has ten entries, a number that corresponds to the number of adjectives found in the original formula. The subsequent vaggas also conform, by and large, to this arrangement as no less than ten out of the remaining sixteen vaggas have ten entries each of “*iti pi so bhagavā*. ”

In the case of the first vagga, the ten words (*arahaṃ* and so forth) are directly taken from the canonical litany. In the subsequent vaggas, however, one becomes aware of a major deviation from the canonical text. This consists of the novel practice of repeating the word *pāramīsampanno*, each time preceded by the name of the particular *pāramī*, and the words *iti pi so bhagavā*, to describe the Buddha. The main body of the *Ākāravattārasutta* thus consists of the phrase “*iti pi so bhagavā* ” repeated one hundred and seventy-four times and the word “*pāramīsampanno* ” only ten less than that number!

The concept of *pāramī* is, of course, conspicuously absent in the canonical formula of “*iti pi so bhagavā*. ” Assuming that the word “*sammasambuddho*” in the formula might point to the attainment of the *pāramīs*, the number of perfections should still not exceed the canonical ten (as in the *Pāramīvagga*, see #17). New *Pāramīs* must, therefore, be invented to make up the bulk of the sutta. This is accomplished initially by designating some of the chief events in the career of a Bodhisatta, viz., the *abhinīhāra*

(resolve to become a buddha), the *gabbhavutṭhāna* (emerging from the womb in a purified manner), and *abhisambodhi* (Supreme Awakening), as *pāramīs*. Beyond this point the author feels free to draw upon the canonical clusters of “*dhammas*” (*khandha* [consisting of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*], *vijjā*, *pariññā*, *ñāṇa*, *bodhipakkhiya*, *bala*, *cariyā*, *samāpatti*, *lakkhaṇa* and so forth) to serve as *pāramīs*. The Blessed One is then described as endowed with these manifold perfections, e.g. “*iti pi so bhagavā cattāro satipaṭṭhāna pāramīsampanno*” [#21], “*iti pi so bhagavā thāmabalapāramīsampanno*” [#24].

There is nothing unusual in the idea that the recitation of the “*iti pi so bhagavā* ” formula can ward off evil. Indeed, in the *Lokaneyyappakaraṇa*, also an apocryphal text originating in Thailand, not only the entire chant but just the first four syllables “*iti pi so* ” together with “*bha-ga-vā* ” are shown to have magic powers.⁸ In this text the Bodhisatta narrates the story of a layman called Soṇa to a yakkha. Soṇa once had climbed a tree in a forest and was bitten by a deadly snake. Foreseeing his imminent death.

Soṇa surrendered himself to the protection of the Buddha and, remembering his virtues through the recitation of the “*iti pi so bhagavā* ” formula, was saved. The yakkha, having listened to this story, begged the Bodhisatta to reveal to him the function of the “seven syllables” (*sattakkharānaṃ kiccaṃ*— a usage reminiscent of the Brahmanical *ṣaḍakṣara* (e.g. *oṃ namaḥ śivāya*) or the *aṣṭākṣara* (e.g. *Om namo Vāsudevāya*) mantras. The Bodhisatta then composed an acrostic using each syllable of the formula. Several of the items (notably *iddhi*, *vijjā*, *ñāṇa*, and *bala*) encountered in the elaboration of the “*iti pi so bhagavā* ” formula in the *Ākāravattārasutta* are also found in these seven verses.⁹ Whether the *Lokaneyyappakaraṇa* in any way influenced the composition of the *Ākāravattāra* or not is a moot question; but one must note that the former was not presented as a “sutta” but only as a *pakaraṇa* or a treatise.

Given the prominent place it accords to the canonical formula of “*iti pi so bhagavā*,” the *Ākāravattārasutta* may be permitted to call itself a “sutta,” however the presumption of authority to speak on issues of Vinaya displayed here is quite unprecedented. No extant *Vinaya* text, *Aṭṭhakathā*, or oral tradition of the Theravāda countries is ever on record for punishing Vinaya transgressions with retributions in hells. Sure enough, the five *ānantarika kammās* (matricide and so forth) – evil acts that find retribution without delay -must immediately lead the perpetrator to the Avīci hell. Equally, those who indulge in evil actions are reborn in various states of loss and woe (apāya). But the ingenious manner in which the author of the *Ākāravattārasutta* has arranged retribution for the seven Vinaya offences (*pārājika* , *saṅghādisesa*, *thullaccaya*, *pācittiya*, *pāṭidesaniya*, *dukkāṭa*, and *dubbhāsita*) in the seven great hells (Avīci, Mahātāpa, Tāpana, Lokantara, Bherava, Kālasutta, Saṅjīva respectively), is not in keeping with the Vinaya texts of the Theravāda (and probably of any other Buddhist) tradition or even with the law of karmic retribution.

The original source for this innovation can possibly be traced to the *Jātakatṭhakathā*, particularly to the Nimijātaka (*Jātaka*, VI, pp. 105-115 [No. 541]). King Nimi is taken to the hellish abodes (nirayas) to witness the retribution for such evil acts as cheating, forgery, hurting the virtuous brahmins and samaṇas, plucking the feathers of birds and killing them, adulteration of food, theft (presented in that order,) and finally the most heinous acts of killing one’s mother or father, or an arahanta (varieties of the ānantarika kamma). It is to be noted in this connection that this Jātaka verse uses the Vinaya term “*pārājika*” to describe the [lay] perpetrators of the last category: “*ye mātaraṃ vā pitaraṃ va loke, pārājikā arahante hananti*” (verse 475). The commentator seems to be aware of the rather unusual manner in which the Vinaya term Pārājika is used here and adds: “*pārājikā ti jarajinṇe mātāpitāro ghātetvā gihibhāve yeva pārājikaṃ pattā*.” Thus it would appear that there was a precedence for the use of this technical term in a less rigid manner, applicable even to those householders who were not qualified to join the Order on account of their evil deeds. The statement in the *Ākāravattārasutta* that the “householders ... would be guilty of pārājika (*tattha gahatthā mātughātādikammaṃ katvā sāsanato pārājikaṃ āpajjeyyūṃ* [#2])” thus establishes a direct link between the Nimijātaka and our sutta. It seems likely that the use of the term pārājikā in this jātaka (coupled with the description of the ussadaniraya) might have given our author the idea to develop this link for the remaining Vinaya offences as well and to further correlate them with the appropriate hells. Although initially used for householders, this karmic retribution plan, elaborated with precise details of duration, was then simply extended to mendicants (pabbajitā) also. This would not be seen as highly objectionable by traditional Buddhists since the “sutta” only helped to demonstrate the ability of the “*iti pi so bhagavā*” formula to destroy the consequences of even ānantarika acts.

Moreover, the assertion that the sutta forms a part of the “*caturāsīti dhammakkhandaṣaṣa*” [#6], that it was spoken by all of the twenty-eight Buddhas headed by Dīpaṅkara [#31], and also that the “fruit of remembering the Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma is obtained by reciting this

sutta” [see verse 54], removes any doubt concerning its affiliation with the Theravāda tradition. In view of this, a few stray statements like “as many Buddhas as grains of sand on the river Ganges” (#6: *anekāya Gaṅgāya vālokupamehi Buddhhehi*), or the promise that “one will obtain living together with the Tathāgata” (#33: “*Tathāgatena so saddhiṃ saṃvāsaṃ paṭilabhati*”), should not be seen as reflecting an unorthodox influence. Indeed, the concluding verse of the sutta “One who sees the Good Law sees me; one who does not see the Good Law, even if he sees me, does not see” (see #45) seems to reaffirm the true nature of the Theravada faith in the Buddha.

This brings us to the intriguing final sentence (appearing just before the verse of benediction) of the text, claiming that “without a doubt, this (i.e. the *Ākāravattāra*) sutta is spoken by the lord in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* (“*Samyuttaṇnikāye idaṃ bhagavatā bhāsitaṃ nisamsayaṃ*,” #49). This is manifestly incorrect as this sutta cannot be traced to the extant edition of the *Samyutta-Nikāya* or to any other parts of the Pali canon. A possible explanation is to take the words “*idaṃ suttaṃ*” to refer not to the *Ākāravattāra sutta* itself, but to the “*iti pi so bhagavā*” formula, the central focus of that sutta. This formula is found in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* (e.g. V, p. 343) which might indeed have served as the main source for the author of our sutta.¹⁰ What then is the significance of the assuring words “*nisamsayaṃ*”? Surely, no one would have questioned the canonical source of so well known a formula as the “*iti pi so bhagavā*”?

A more convincing way of solving this mystery is to take the words “*idaṃ suttaṃ*” to refer not to the entire *Ākāravattāra* sutta, but to a single verse in it, namely, verse No. 55: “*yo passati saddhammaṃ so maṃ passati pandito, apassamāno saddhammaṃ maṃ passanto pi na passati*.” This is a versified rendering of the following words uttered by the Buddha to the dying monk Vakkali: “*yo kho, Vakkali, dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati; yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. dhammaṃ hi, Vakkali, passanto maṃ passati; maṃ passanto dhammaṃ passati*.” Unlike the “*iti pi so bhagavā*” formula, these words are not of common occurrence. The *Itivuttaka* has a variation: (*dhammaṃ so bhikkhave na passati, dhammaṃ apassanto na maṃ passati*);¹¹ but the *Ākāravattāra sutta* rendition in its entirety is attested only in the *Samyutta-Nikāya*.¹² The fact that this verse reads like a quotation, and that it appears at the very end of the work, lends support to the suggestion that the author of the *Ākāravattāra sutta* (or of its *Vañṇanā*, or the copyist) wanted to reassure the reader about the authenticity of these solemn but less known words of the canon.

In addition to its interest in fostering the salvific power of the “*iti pi so bhagavā*” formula, the *Ākāravattāra sutta* shares the linguistic peculiarity of irregular geminate consonants with the fourteenth century apocryphal work mentioned above, namely, the *Lokaneyyappakaraṇa*, and hence can be assigned to the same period.

The following signs have been used:

[*] indicates folio No. of MS.

(?) indicates doubtful reading or meaning.

<.> indicates irregular geminate consonant.

Additions in [].

Emendations in ().

NOTES

1. *Paññāsa-Jātaka or Zimme Paṇṇāsa* (in the Burmese Recension), 2 volumes, ed. P.S.Jaini, Pali Text Society, London. 1981-83. Translated (by I.B. Horner and P.S. Jaini) as *Apocryphal Birth Stories*, 2 volumes, Pali Text Society, London, 1985-86. For a study of the indigenous Chinese Buddhist scriptures, see *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., University of Hawaii Press, 1990.
2. *The Jātaka (Jātakatthavaṇṇanā)*, 6 volumes, ed. V. Fausboll, Pali Text Society (2nd ed.), London, 1964.
3. A possible exception would be the Buddhāpadāna, the first book of the *Apadāna* (Part I, ed Mary F. Lilley, Pali Text Society, London, 1925, pp. 1-6) of the Khuddaka-Nikāya. According to Professor Bechert, this section was composed in Sri Lanka by Mahāyānasthaviras and was included in the Pali canon in the first century or in the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. See Heinz Bechert, “Mahayana Literature in Sri Lanka: The Early Phase,” in *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honour of Edward Conze*. ed. Lancaster and Gomez, Berkeley Buddhist Series, I, 1977.
4. Oskar v. Hinuber, “The Pali Manuscripts Kept at the Siam Society, Bangkok: A Short Catalogue; Journal of *the Siam Society*, volume 75, pp.9-74, 1987.
5. Tr.: Mr. Kon Jambhu and Mrs. Keev, having faith, created (i.e. got made) this manuscript of the *Ākāravattārasutta* in the Buddha’s Teaching. It exists in the *Samyutta Nikāya*.
6. von Hinuber, op. cit., p.44.
7. *Cūlavamsa: Being the more recent part of the Mahāvamsa*, Part I., tr. Wilhelm Geiger (and from German into English by C. Mabel Rickmers), Pali Text Society, London, 1929.
8. *Lokaneyyappaharaṇaṃ*, ed. P.S.Jaini, Pali Text Society, London, 1986.
9. Ibid., verses 278-84. The following verse, beginning with the second syllable “ti” can be cited as a good example:
*tikāro eva tibhavahitakaro tikaṃ oghapāraṃ,
tisso vijjānupatto tibhavabhayaharo tikkhaññāsiyutto;
titthanto aggamaggaṃ paramasukhadado tiṇṇamohandhakāro,
tiṇṇaṃ lokānaṃ aggo tibhavasukhadado tiṇṇalokaṃ namāmi.* [279]
10. It should be noted, however, that the formula found in our text is not identical with any of its versions attested in the canon. Two parts of this sutta, namely, “*so bhagavā cakkhubhūto ...dhammarāja*“, and the last line, “*sādhū kho pana ... dassanaṃ hoti* ” are, for example, missing in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (ed. J.

Charpentier, Pali Text Society, London, 1917, Part I), p. 62. The *Samyutta-Nikāya* (ed. Leon Feer, Pali Text Society, London, 1888, Part V) version (p. 343), is shorter than both.

11 *Itivuttaka*, section 92 (ed. E. Windisch, Pali Text Society, London, 1890).

12 *Samyutta-Nikāya*, Part III, p. 120.

13 Cf. *Na hete ettakāyeva, buddhadhammā bhavissare; Aññepi viciniissāmi, ye dhammā bodhipācanā. Vicinanto tadādakkhim, dutiyaṃ sīlapāramiṃ; Pubbakehi mahesīhi, āsevitānisevitaṃ. The Jātaka*, I, p. 20.

14-15 Cf. *The Jātaka*, I, pp. 4—5 (Nidānakathā, verses 21—32) and Buddhavaṃsa, ch. II verses 10—21 (*Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpitaka*, ed. N. A. Jayawickrama, Pali Text Society, London, 1974).

16 See note 10. The line ” *cakkhubhūto . . . dhammasāmi*” appears in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Pali Text Society, London, 1900, Part III, p. 226), but not as a part of the “iti pi so bhagavā” formula.

17 On the tradition of the twenty-eight Buddhas, see *The Jātaka*, I, pp. 43—45 (Nidānakathā, verses 246—51).

18 See note 7.

19 Cf. *The Jātaka*, I (Nidānakathā) verse 189.

20 See note 7.

21 See *Samyutta-Nikāya*, Part III, p. 120.